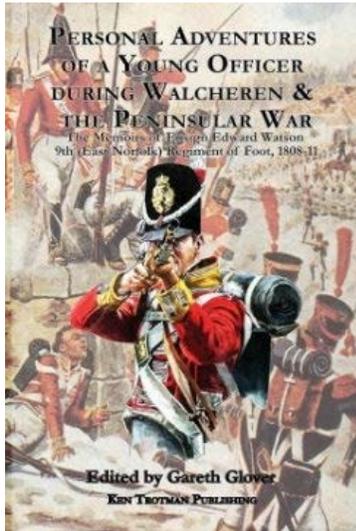


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

Watson, Edward. *Personal Adventures of a Young Officer during Walcheren & the Peninsular War: the Memoirs of Ensign Edward Watson 9th (East Norfolk) Regiment of Foot, 1808 - 11*. Gareth Glover (ed.). Godmanchester (UK): Ken Trotman, 2017. PB. 84 pages. £7.50



One of the least written about topics on Wellington's Army is religion.<sup>1</sup> Officially there were chaplains assigned to the Army, but the exact number of them varied from year to year. All of them were from the Church of England. Not surprisingly, very few left a written record of their time in the army. I know of only three sets of letters or memoirs that have been published by chaplains, two were first published in 1809 and 1810.<sup>2</sup> The other are those of Reverend George Stonestreet who was the chaplain to the Guards Division in the Waterloo Campaign. These were published in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

Despite only having Church of England chaplains, within the British Army there were many Catholics and other smaller denominations. Possibly the most popular of the protestant sects were the Methodists. They were led by lay ministers and as the Peninsular War went on their congregations grew. Virtually all of their members were from the ranks and the Army provided them no support.

*Personal Adventures of a Young Officer* is possibly the most unusual set of memoirs I have ever read. They tell the story of a young ensign in the 9<sup>th</sup> Foot who converted to Methodism while on leave in 1810. Like many new converts he felt the need to spread the word. He returned to the Peninsula in April 1810 and on his way there he tried to engage his fellow subalterns in religious discourse, but was mostly ignored. Once in Portugal, he began preaching to the enlisted soldiers in his regiment and soon held regular prayer meetings. His proselytizing alienated him from the other officers, except for Lieutenant James Whitley, and he became a social outcast. At first he was encouraged to stop his religious activities and when he refused to do so, he was often given additional duties that would take him away from the regiment. This did not deter him and upon his

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 20 of Sir Charles Oman's *Wellington's Army* is a short examination of the spiritual life of the soldiers in his army.

<sup>2</sup> William Bradford's *Sketches of The Country, Character, and Costume, in Portugal and Spain, Made during the Campaign, and on the Route of the British Army, in 1808 and 1809* published in 1809 and recently reprinted in 2017 and James Ormsby's *An Account of the Operations of the British Army: And of the State and Sentiments of the People of Portugal and Spain, During the Campaigns of the Years 1808 & 1809: in a Series of Letters* published in 1810.

<sup>3</sup> Stonestreet, George G. *Recollections of the Scenes of which I was a Witness in the Low Countries & France in the Campaigns of 1814 and 1815 and the Subsequent Occupation of French Flanders: The Journal and Letters of the Reverend George Griffin Stonestreet 1814-16*. Gareth Glover (ed.). Godmanchester: Ken Trotman, 2009.

return he took up where he left off. Ensign Watson did not just confine his efforts to the British Army. He often talked with Portuguese priests in an effort to have them see the error of their ways.

Ensign Watson's activities soon were noticed by his chain-of-command and he and Lieutenant Whitley, were brought before his brigade commander, General Andrew Hay. The general, who after hearing their refusal to quit their preaching, stated

“In my opinion they are fit subjects for a lunatic asylum, and should be placed in strait-waistcoats; but, to shorten the matter, let them be reported at headquarters; and in the mean time place them under arrest; for during thirty-seven years' service I never met with a more flagrant instance of open and rebellious mutiny.”<sup>4</sup>

Ensign Watson's behavior eventually was referred to Wellington, who did not believe “he could stop the prayer meetings as long as the men still attended faithfully to their duties.”<sup>5</sup> Ensign Watson eventually felt that all the additional duties that kept him from the regiment was interfering with his preaching. Not able to convince his commander to let him stay with the regiment, he resigned his commission in August 1811.

*Personal Adventures of a Young Officer* is a fascinating memoir from two perspectives. Although religious activities that were not part of the Church of England were not necessarily openly discouraged, neither were they sanctioned. The book provides insight of these activities and the problems it caused some of those who participated in them. As importantly, it is a study of how a junior officer who would not conform to the norms of the regimental mess was ostracized and then effectively banished from the regiment. Something I have not seen in any other set of memoirs. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in religion in Wellington's Army, but also for the dynamics of the British officer's mess.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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<sup>4</sup> Page 51

<sup>5</sup> Page 7